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well as other forms of life; but a theory of evolution that is to explain organic and human life will need to be much more comprehensive than the one with which we are familiar at present; and for those who believe that evolution must be read backwards as well as forwards, the importance of a study of history or the evolution of human affairs as a means of contributing to that more comprehensive theory, is not likely to be challenged.

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ETHICAL PESSIMISM IN BERGSON.

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THE ethical pessimism referred to in the title of this paper is primarily an impression which arises in the mind after reading one of M. Bergson's early works, the essay on laughter. The aim of the discussion is to point out the impression, and to raise the question whether there is any reason for it in the account of the comic, from which it arises.

An essay on laughter hardly seems an appropriate place in which to practise ethical diagnosis. And it almost savors of banality to begin to ask of this particular essay what sort of moral spirit animates it. The only spirit that is in it, in a sense, is that of the artist; or of the great author who chances upon an innocent, little noticed psychic phenomenon which he can proceed to dissect and anatomize for the behoof solely of such as delight in such things. Bergson has no didactic purpose to serve in this book; nor has he any taste for coarse effects. He administers no moral shock to his reader. He upsets no prejudices. He has no interest, in fact, but to cut open the thing he is handling and let light in. His central question is the simple one, what is it that we

laugh at when we laugh? And he proceeds to examine specimens and see. And if in the process of examination, his analytic scalpel occasionally passes uncomfortably close to something morally vital,—well, we hardly notice it, or we forget; it is all so naturally done, and with so deft a touch. Yet the book leaves an idea in our minds, an edged idea, so to call it, which penetrates right into life's moral center and leaves an impression there. It is impossible, of course, to put the central idea of Bergson's essay in a word. But put in as adequate a single phrase as one can borrow from the work itself, the idea is that the comical in human life is the 'unadaptable,' and the 'unadaptable' is the 'rigid.' To expand it a little: wherever there appears in human life the 'inflexible' spirit; the type of man who, in the midst of an environment which invites him to adapt himself to it, does not do so, but pursues his own course, deaf to its calls; the man who thus presents a fixed front to life and has not the necessary 'suppleness' or 'elasticity' to yield gracefully to its infinitely subtle and varying demands; such a character has always something comical about him. It requires all Bergson's development of this idea to exhibit to the full its power and its *prima facie* convincingness. But so developed, its plausibility wins upon the mind, as it is dwelt upon. For the comical side of the man who stops his ears when he has set his course,—whether it be Don Quixote tilting at his windmills or any other equally unpractical type of idealist,—becomes more and more easy to see once we consent to look for it. And seeing that this resolute type of character, with all his limitations, gives tone to so much of what is best in life, we end with a sense of disillusion; with the impression, to put it frankly, that life itself is more of a comedy than we had quite thought. Of course, the discovery that there is more of comedy in life's 'earnest' than most serious people suspect, is one which other works than Bergson's have enabled men to make. But the point is that in Bergson's case the

discovery comes as a disillusion. The reason, if we may anticipate so far as to say so, is that with him the comic is only comical. The idea of comedy does not emerge from his hands dignified, as it did, for example, from Meredith. This is because, beginning his investigation at the lower limit, so to speak, of the comic, he leaves the impression of having resolved the comic as a whole into its lowest terms. Hence, in showing how far the comic penetrates life, he seems but to show how much of life is ridiculous. And so much of it is so, that the whole loses in ultimate value. Laughter seems to have impregnated life with a tinge of genuine pessimism.

Such is the impression. The only way to test the justice of it is to ask what conception of the good life underlies the view of the comic here presented to us. That some moral view is implicated in the theory is acknowledged by the author. It appears in the anti-social tendency which is said to characterize all laughable conduct. The life of human society on the author's view requires of its members a certain 'tension,' an alertness of response to very varied stimuli. A certain degree of this alertness is necessary to the human individual if he is even to live. But after it has been sufficiently created in him to ensure his survival, it is expedient that the power should be kept alive in him by further and more delicate exercise, by adaptations to conditions not exactly essential to existence. It is by these further adjustments that society refines itself and attains to its best life. Now society's instrument for securing from the individual adaptation to these social conventions, manners and subtler conditions of 'good' life generally, is laughter. Laughter is thus a socializing instrument. It is always, as Bergson points out, the laughter of a group. It is, at bottom, a group of human beings laughing at one of their number who has fallen short of some adaptation which was expected of him,—a "form of social castigation," perhaps the gentlest way which nature anywhere adopts of eliminating the unfit. This gives

the analysis of laughter at once a moral interest. In marking out what society does not want, laughter shows by implication what it does want. It sketches society's ideal. Our question here is, what sort of ideal is thus sketched, and whether it be not one to attain which some of life's absolutely valuable aspects have to be sacrificed.

One fundamental and doubtless sound assumption of the treatise is that it is really society which laughs. And if we are to find in this fact an account of society's ideal, we must determine two further points, what exactly it laughs at and why. To the former question, which is the important one, Bergson's answer is that society laughs at the 'mechanical' in life and conduct, at that in life which is fixed or rigid when it should have been supple, subtle, sinuous. Our view is that Bergson, in saying so, indicates quite rightly the general direction in which we must look for the comic; but without describing very accurately what is found there.

That the general locus of the comic is to be found, in *some* sense, in the 'mechanical' appears from the wide and ready applicability which Bergson can show this formula to have. When a man rushing along the street, for instance, is suddenly brought to a stop by falling over a stick, the 'laughable aspect' of the situation (if it has one) is said to be that a human being should have thus gone straight forward like an automaton when he might have gracefully threaded his way amongst the obstacles. And it does indeed quite seem so. Moreover, it is the same failure to negotiate the obstacle which makes a man comical who dips his pen into an empty inkwell or sits down on a bottomless chair or otherwise falls into the traps of the practical joker. He does not see what is awaiting him; and instead of adapting himself to the circumstances he goes straight on, as he has been in the habit of doing. Again, what else is the absent-minded person,—that veritable fountain of comedy,—than one chronically unable to change his path from its habitual direction and bend it as required by the world

about him? Even that highly refined comic character the dreamer,—the Don Quixote,—answers the same description. Here we not only see the actual world to which the absent-minded person should be adapting himself; we also see the unreal world itself, to which his absent mind is present. We even see that fanciful world in the making, and thus understand how the day-dreamer colors and distorts the realities he meets. We know what Don Quixote *thinks* his windmills are, and see the logic of it. The laughable always implies this fundamental absent-mindedness. The comical person is one who lets himself be moved by the momentum of his own habit of mind instead of actively responding to the calls of his present environment. In this sense, the comical is the ‘mechanical.’ And society laughs at it because society wants its members not to be automata, but to adapt themselves finely to the circumstances around them.

But is the thing at which society laughs properly the mechanical? If that term must be used, we hold, at least, that there is something in this sort of mechanism which Bergson’s treatment of it tends to obscure. When he is treating the lower forms of the comic,—a comical face or gesture, for instance,—he is, of course, seeking to express the spirit behind the laughter, the subtle movement of imagination which provokes it. When he likens the object to a mechanism, it is for imagination that the ‘mechanism’ exists. And the feature of all such objects which he neglects is to be found only by approaching them in the light of his own interpretations.

What construction, then, does Bergson put upon the object of the imagination in those simpler examples of the ludicrous? Taking the instance of such physical deformities as are laughable, he points out, first, that they are seen as human. A comical deformity is “one which a normally built person could successfully imitate.” But this is not his only or his main characterization. Such a deformity is also one which can appear as though it were something fixed upon the possessor, a fixed habit

contracted by him, and perpetuating itself. A hunchback at whom we laugh is one who appears to have become puckered up, so to speak, permanently. "By a kind of physical obstinacy, by *rigidity*, in a word, his back persists in the habit it has contracted." A comical physiognomy is a face screwed up, as it were, and staying so; something fixed and mechanical 'encrusted' upon the native mobility of life.

We are said to laugh, then, at a kind of fixity. On closer analysis, however, this interpretation seems clearly to point beyond itself. Confronted by the fact that there is at least one familiar type of fixity at which we do not laugh, namely, the set in the countenance of a man of character or refinement, Bergson points out that this countenance is implicitly mobile. "It maintains in the midst of its fixity a certain indecision in which are obscurely portrayed all possible shades of the state of mind" within. But what is this mobility? It is plainly not actual changes of expression, for we see it when the face is still. It must consist, then, in suggested changes. Other expressions, variations of the one before us, gather round this one, as it were, making what Professor James would call its 'fringe'; and scatter in it their various lights and shadows. Nor do we seem to err in interpreting it so. For all such centralizing of variations around their type is indeed activity; it is the tension of a principle sustaining itself amidst its expressions. And we cannot, in the long run, find mobility to be anything else. But if so, the phenomenon is strangely ubiquitous. It invades the comical form too. Why should not the grimace exercise the same tension over a periphery of variations which shade off from it? True, as a face it is not really typical. It is an extreme, a marginal variety of its class. But it is not, therefore, abandoned by its class,—alone, and so dead. It is still a face. The same delicate imagination which saw the infinite varieties shadowed in the face of character and thus saw it mobile, sees *some* variations assembled around this one too,

shading off from it in coarser degrees. Which means that this face too is active, by suggestion.

And, surely, it is indeed in its *activity* that the comic spirit luxuriates. When we laugh at a distorted face, we do not surely laugh at the twist, as a thing by itself, fixed and laid on the mobility of life. We laugh at the man screwing up his face. When we laugh at a crumpled back, it is truly at "something which a normally built person could successfully imitate." But this means that we laugh at the man crumpling his back, not at the hump, as a dead thing attached to his living body and hindering it. What is comical is not a rigidity encrusted upon life, then. It is a movement of life itself.

To take one more example. The mechanically repeated gestures of a speaker may become comical. The reason alleged by Bergson for this is that they give the man the appearance of being a mere moving apparatus. Mere gesture, it is explained, is too indelicate to convey a complex meaning. Only the resources of a competent vocabulary suffice for that. Yet gesture tries it; and this mechanism simulating life is the laughable thing. To quote Bergson's words: "Gesture here vies with speech. Jealous of the latter, gesture closely dogs the speaker's steps, it, too, offering to act as interpreter. . . . Well and good; but then it must pledge itself to follow thought through all phases of its development. An idea is something that grows, buds, blossoms and ripens from beginning to end of a speech. It never repeats itself. . . . Then let gesture adopt the fundamental law of life, which is a complete absence of repetition. But one finds that a certain movement, perhaps of head or arm, a movement always the same, seems to return at regular intervals. . . . This is no longer life. It is automatism establishing itself in life, and imitating it. It belongs to the comic." But surely gestures convey something. Those of the histrionic artist do. Those of a competent speaker also do. What gestures do, or attempt, is to block out certain situations which the words are describ-

ing, in a crude and rough outline. They sketch the framework, so to speak, within which the verbal representation falls. So far as they are effective, they bind the representation together, they keep it in hand, and so do not merely mark time mechanically behind the movements of life, but live themselves. And to however low an ebb the life of gesture may fall, it never goes quite out. Reduce it to nothing but a mechanical swaying of the body or swinging of awkward arms; it is yet expressive. The speaker is in point of fact working at a task, and it is the task which he started. His 'idea' may have blossomed under his treatment or become mutilated; it is still in some sense the same idea. He entered upon his present theme, at any rate; or at the very least, began this present speech. And the sustained repetitions of a 'movement always the same' are simply his way of making visible, despite any possible contrary appearances, the fact that he is still at it. The movements express a unity and a unity which is there. It is not the mechanical swing of the arms that is amusing. We could get that from the pendulum of a clock. It is the man laboriously doing it. The laughable is a certain movement of the living man himself, as contrasted with a mechanical movement attached to him and hindering him. In a word, we laugh at him, and not at his arms.

As a representation of the comic, then, Bergson's account obscures something. Not the simple fact that the human aspect is present, but the fact that it predominates,—that it is the source of the effect. That it is the human aspect which does predominate, however, should become conclusively clear from the simple fact that it comes more and more into prominence as comic effect heightens,—that is, as we rise in the scale from cruder comedy to higher. If life were really comical in so far as it reminded us of mechanism, it ought to become the more comical the better it presented mechanism to us. Now in a certain sense of 'more,' and up to a certain point, this is true. Bergson, for instance, describes one

form of theatrical or pantomimic entertainment to which he seems to attach importance as an example of the principle of the comic, in which the effect is obtained by attaining to an appearance of mechanism gradually. The troop of performers on the stage are increased in number from moment to moment, and their movements simultaneously increased in rapidity and in degree of likeness to mechanical things until, in the climax, the human performers almost become mechanical objects, rolling balls, jointed puppets, and so forth. Here the laughter does presumably grow louder as the mechanical is more approached. And no doubt there is a sense in which the fact indicates that the comic effect is being heightened. But it is not being made higher comedy, certainly; and even as a device, as a means of causing vociferous laughter, there is a plain limit to its success,—the point, namely, when the simulation is so well done that the performers simply become mechanical objects and so cease to appeal to the jaded eye as any more comical than actual balls and staves themselves would be. If the comic effect is to survive even on this level, not only must the human side remain present. It must enwrap, and visibly enwrap, the other side in it. These living beings must be imposing mechanism on themselves, not suffering from it. And if the effect, in any spiritual sense of the word, is to *heighten*, the human factor must come more and more to the front. It would not be by becoming more mechanical that a common fool would become a Jaques or a Falstaff, but by becoming less mechanical and more vastly human.

When Bergson himself is asking how advance is made from those simple comic effects which provide him with the clue to the nature of the comic in general, toward higher effects, his language betrays a consciousness of the fact that it is the human which must come out. The forms in which he puts the question seem to imply that it is a question precisely of how the 'mechanical' character becomes submerged. The comic element in the

lower forms is described as 'accidental.' When the runner trips, the fall is brought about by an 'external circumstance.' And the question raised is how the comic may cease to be thus 'in superficial contact' with the person; how it may 'penetrate within.' Implying, apparently, that the higher comic is more inward, more personal. And surely it is by becoming thus more human and lifelike that a comic character approaches greatness.

The fact upon which we have so far insisted is that even in the cruder forms of the comic, and increasingly as we ascend toward the higher levels of comedy, it is of the essence of the comical to express life itself rather than a hindrance of life by something different in principle from it. The importance of the fact lies in this: that while the comical is always a behavior of this sort on the part of life, not all behavior of this sort on the part of a living being appears to be comical. Whatever other distinguishable worlds of human experience may be characterized by the principle here found at the root of the comic, the world of *morality* does appear to be so characterized. If life were deprived of the liberty of imposing this 'mechanical' form upon its activity, it would indeed cease to be comical. But there would disappear from it also the major portion of what we commonly call its moral function.

There is no need to go into detail to establish the *general* affinity between the comical as described by Bergson and the moral as we know it. It is the source of the impression mentioned at the beginning of the paper, and it lies on the surface of all Bergson's prominent examples. It is comical to act according to fixed habit; but in all that is moral there is an aspect of habit. It is comical to be like another mind; but every man who takes another mind as an example to follow is so far like him. It is comical to repeat and insist; but moral practice is the sustained insistence and repetition, in season and out of season, of principles which are universal and depend for their validity on neither place nor cir-

cumstance. It is comical for a man having set his course to rush straight for his objective, roughriding circumstance and deaf to the calls of the world; but that is also moral; it is what the runner does who bumps against an obstacle, but it is also what Bunyan's "Christian" does fleeing from the city of destruction. The highest reach of the comical is an absent-mindedness of character; the presence of the mind to another world than the present one; an attempt to shape surroundings in accordance with that world, instead of making it accord with them; a yielding of obedience to the impulse of one's own fixed and formed character and will instead of bending these to the ways of the world. But that is an accurate description of how a man dies for a cause.

In fact, the comic and the moral spirit lie so close to each other that the appearance of affinity can hardly escape notice. And Bergson has not left it unnoticed. He has discussed how far it is real,—the conditions under which the moral can become comical, and the vicious, too, become comical, and what distinguishes both from the comic. He does distinguish them, and his distinction turns on his fundamental account of the difference between the comic and the serious. Of this distinction he really gives two accounts closely dependent on each other.

His more immediate but less satisfactory way of distinguishing the comic and the serious lies open to all readers in the first pages of the essay. One of the most conspicuous features of laughter is said to be the calm indifference and *absence of feeling* which accompanies it.

"Try for a moment to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion; as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue pass over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator; many a drama will turn into comedy. It is enough for us to stop our ears to the music in a room where dancing is going on, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous. How many human actions would stand a similar test? Should we not see

many of them turn suddenly from grave to gay, on isolating them from the accompanying music of sentiment? To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anæsthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence pure and simple.”¹

The distinction between the comical and the moral is easily inferred. Nothing is comical which appeals to our feelings; and it is part of the comic poet's function to contrive to effect a deadening of sentiment and emotion in the spectator. “There is an art of lulling sensibility to sleep,—providing it with dreams as happens in the case of a mesmerized person. And there is also an art of throwing a wet blanket over sympathy at the very moment it might arise, the result being that the situation, though a serious one, is not taken seriously.”² But the moral appeals to feeling and thus cannot be comic: we have shut our eyes to the moral before we open them on the comic.

We have here one of the ways in which Bergson effects the distinction. We have called it unsatisfactory because it borders so closely on tautology. What does it mean to say that a situation is comical only when seen without sentiment, except simply that it cannot be comical if it is taken seriously? The fact is, in order to reach Bergson's true distinction, we must look past these statements to the context from which we have taken them. We must see how this art of lulling sensibility asleep sets to work, and see what exactly it reveals. All along we have been trying to interpret the comic imagination, that is, to see how the world looks to it. And we cannot fall back on the statement that the comic spirit is unemotional and unsympathetic unless we can translate these terms into a description of the object seen. We know that an object looks differently when looked at sentimentally from what it appears when looked at from an indifferent standpoint. But the question is in what do the two differ?

¹“Laughter,” pp. 4, 5.

²“Laughter,” p. 140.

When Bergson comes to round up his conclusions into a comprehensive picture of the comic world,—the world as it appears to comic imagination,—he points out three fundamental features of it which are the reverse of the three fundamental features of life. Normally, life should never turn backwards, never repeat itself and never allow any of its elements to become transposable, *i. e.*, capable of occupying any other place or context than the one they occupy. But when we find in comedy a character like Orgon in Molière's "Tartuffe," for instance, unable to listen to important news, without breaking in upon the speaker at every pause of the conversation with questions regarding the one trivial subject of which his own mind is full, we perceive a travesty of the laws of life; a piece of living human intercourse, or what should have been such, broken into every now and then by a mechanical repetition. Similarly, life may find itself thwarted along the others of its lines of action. A man may be caught in his own trap, or a particular act or word of some one may be placed by a listener into a wholly different context from that to which it really belongs. Whenever life is made thus to repeat itself, turn back upon itself, or submit to mechanical disintegration so that its parts may be detached from it and transposed, it becomes comical.

But we can make nothing of this as a picture applicable to the world of comedy distinctively, without the empty proviso that this picture of inverted life must not touch our feelings. Surely there is a tragic repetition of words. Othello's exclamation, "the handkerchief," breaks in upon Iago's conversation exactly as the "Et Tartuffe?" of Orgon does upon the conversation of the serving maid. The turning back movement,—the theme of the robber robbed and the biter bit,—is surely possible in tragedy too. And to say that the same element could not be transposed, and enter equally well into two contexts or 'series,' except in comedy, would be to say that in tragedy there were no misunderstandings. We

cannot get at Bergson's real conception until we come to close quarters with the manner in which the comic poet is supposed to prune our sympathies and regulate them to the due pitch.

How, then, do our sympathies become alienated, our feelings atrophied to the degree required for comic perception? The poet follows two main methods; he presents us with a person within whose soul the various elements of character are isolated; secondly, he allows the person to gesticulate rather than to act. It is only when we examine the change which comes over the picture of the world when these operations are performed on it, that we get the distinction we are seeking. And if we look closely into it, we shall find that the real effect of these things is to *substitute abrupt transitions for what are supposed to be life's fine gradations*.

A miser whose avarice can be felt spreading itself inch by inch across his soul, until it has interlocked itself with every human interest the man has, and entwined itself into every thread and fiber of his being, could never be comical. It spreads in such a way that every successive advance is graded into the next, and as we watch the whole growing to its own inward music, the emotion rises. But if a vice remains something detached, subsisting along with other interests in the soul, jostling them but not uniting with them, so that its manifestations are abrupt explosions and do not develop themselves or advance upon one another in fine grades, then it may be comical. It will then possess the man partly and intermittently, not wholly or permanently. Thus such scenes are possible as the surprise meeting of Harpagon and his son in Molière's "l'Avare," where the father is distracted between love of his son and of his purse, the two sentiments taking possession of him by turns, keeping him acting now in the one character and now in the other. "Here we should be in the thick of drama," says Bergson, "if only greed and fatherly affection, conflicting with each other in the soul of Har-

pagon, had effected a more or less original combination.” The comical value of gesture lies quite similarly in the way in which it divides the character. Gesture is unintentional. It springs out unawares, often, despite a contrary intention. It thus reveals an abruptness in the transitions from one thing which the person is doing to the next. It reveals a cleft in the character, and leaves the two halves working alternately. Behind the ostensible character which the person wishes to keep up, there is another one; and the latter is always springing into evidence in gesture. In both cases there is transition perpetually going on, as there must be in any developing life, from act to act and word to word and deed to deed. But the transitions are not made finely. In the tragic character they are.

Now if we are to express this difference between the serious and the comic in a satisfactory way, we shall have to express it as a difference of the degree to which means are sacrificed to end. The abrupt transition is such a sacrifice. In the tragic movement the sacrifice is not felt.

In the tragic repetition of words, the words repeated do not simply jump into prominence repeatedly like a spring which is released when the conversation pauses and is repressed when it flows on again. The words when they are repeated are meant to be thrown into prominence, and even abruptly. But if they seem to be simply ‘sprung upon’ the rest of the conversation, externally, it is only for a moment. Really they are most powerfully relevant. By an infinitude of subtle links, they are connected with the entire context. This means that they do not attain their prominence by doing violence to the process by which their context was developing; or, if you like, by doing violence to the attention that was engrossed in the other things; but by developing the context and so winning the attention through infinitely finely graded steps. To make the matter clearer by an example: Orgon’s repetition of his phrase has

really the same end in view as Othello's repetition of his. It only reaches its end by a sacrifice of means,—of intermediate steps,—unknown in the other. In both cases the end is to make the repeated thoughts prominent,—or better, central. They are both efforts to centralize. Othello's mind is transfixed by the idea of Desdemona's guilt. He has to listen to a whole deluge of suggestions meant to explain it away, but really powerless to do so; and by repeating the words 'the handkerchief' he is forever roping in the scattering attention, forcing it back, as it were, to the one centrally interesting point. And that centralization is precisely what Orgon is practising in the scene with Dorine. Only, the sacrifice of fineness of graded intermediate step is in his case inevitable. Because the point around which he would centralize everything is not really central. He does not behave like the character he is supposed to be,—the head of a house returning home after an absence and receiving news of his household. Instead of beginning with first things first, and overtaking the other items of news as they shaded off from it in an approximately true order of importance, he must spring straightway to the one trivial matter which happens to be interesting him. He must behave as though the one impudent being whom his roof shelters were the only person of consequence there, and speak of him and pity him, and when told that the wife of his bosom is gravely ill, fail to hear. Tartuffe, of course, existed; and lived amongst the others. And there doubtless was a graceful way of reaching him, had Orgon overtaken first the matters which naturally lay between. But he makes straight to his point. He lays rough hands on the attention which is occupied in a natural way with the whole subject-matter of the household and its affairs, and wrests it, so to speak, at a leap to the very outmost boundary of its picture.

Here, then, we have the net meaning of Bergson's proviso that the comically inverted life, if it is to be

comical, shall be perceived 'without emotion.' It means that abrupt transitions take the place of sinuous gliding movements of the soul. It means that in that movement which is life, the end is seen and reached straight from the immediate, without the possible intermediate steps being delicately perceived and considered and made the means. It means, if we may venture to put it in the language of Bergson's general philosophy, that the juxtaposition of things in space is substituted for the interpenetration of events in time. Hence, the moral is not comical so long as it is in this sense delicate. But it will become so whenever that abruptness appears in it.

But does not the moral very often bear this character? Is this character not often a necessary condition of its remaining true to itself and to the moral law? In all its conformity to law, however passive that may appear,—even if it be unalterable habit,—does there not lie hidden a certain potential violence, the power to mutilate the perhaps fair proportions of its own individual life or bend circumstances towards a point to which their own development would never have led them? We do not suggest but that if the moral man were great enough, he could so master all circumstances, even in a very imperfect world, as to lead them always through fine gradations towards his moral ends. Doubtless the ultimate good is, as Plato thought, the consummation of grace and beauty as well as of righteousness. But, certainly, its perfect wholeness lies beyond the reach of anyone of us. The common man cannot complete its broken arcs into the perfect round. And we are all common men. The most he can do, with his imperfect and fitful visions of the perfect, is to shape his life very roughly according to its boldest outlines. To be just he must often refuse to be kind, however well he knows that there is a justice which is kinder than his, and perhaps juster too. To be true he must often fail to be graceful, even though the highest grace be also the truest truth.

Nay, if any man were great enough never to do violence to the perfect orb of life in his own soul and in the world of affairs, would we call him moral unless he were prepared to lose good, as common men have to do, did he happen to be clad in their common garb,—to stand, if need were, amid all temptations and opportunities, a solid, unbending, highly ‘absent-minded’ figure, without even the consolation of conscious greatness, with no refuge at all, except the unverified conviction of being strong in being right? We incline to think the answer negative; that no man is morally great unless we can say of him that he would still be moral though he were not great. And to say so is to identify all morality with the very principle which Bergson finds in the comic. Deprive life of the liberty to impose this ‘mechanical’ form upon its own action, wipe out from life all that contains this awkwardness and abruptness, and you cut away all the morality which is only strong and straight, without being refined or clever. And if this be the principle whose expressions society rejects and castigates, then society is committed to an ideal which is false, in the sense that it is one which society can only reach by squandering the very values by which it subsists.

The pessimism of this does not need to be labored. To rule out the mechanical, the rigid, from the life which society wants is plainly to withdraw the good from out of the reach of common men and make it the aristocratic privilege of a few. But it is also to lose sight of what, definitely, the good can be, even for the few. It is to coquette with a doctrine of moral relativity. The good life implies no longer the remaining firm, “through thick and thin,” to a fixed law, trusting to the unseen future to fill in and soften its rude outlines. It implies rather the movement of the *élan de vie*, succeeding by its sinuosity, worming its way *between* the obstacles, forever altering its own course, and even shedding part of its own being to reach its ends. The good is simply the keeping alert and responsive, the making life a series

of delicate adjustments to varying circumstances. The moral imperative in the end is deprived of its absolute and positive character. It says no longer be 'just,' or 'courageous,' or 'sincere.' It does not even say 'be good.' It only says 'be adaptable.' The good life is transmuted into a piece of high art; or into a game of skill, in which the winners are they who have the gifts and have cultivated the skill. When Kant declared that the only thing in the world or out of it which was good without qualification was the good will, he courted another sort of pessimism,—that of thinking that gifts and graces went for nothing, and that the labor of education and the progress of institutions brought man no nearer heaven. But he at least preached a gospel to the poor, and saw with Christianity that in some sense the race could not be to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

If the human aspect of that 'mechanization' of life in which Bergson finds the comical were given its value, it would, we have admitted, bring the comic and the moral together on the basis of a certain community of principle. We end, therefore, with a problem,—with the question of the results of this affinity between things so disparate. And certain familiar facts lend a sinister look to the conclusion. We are perplexed often by this very affinity, by the thinness of the line which separates the hero we worship from the mere eccentric at whom we only smile, the noble charity which believeth all things from the 'imbecility' which, so far as one can see, 'believeth all things' too. And it is true that the two spheres border closely,—that the scenes are many in life where we "know not whether to laugh or weep." But this *needs* be no abortive union of the highest and the lowest, unless you take the crudest laugh, the guffaw which points with the finger, or the smile of derision, as typical of laughter. If, on the other hand, a smile is not always a disguised frown, if society may laugh without laughing to scorn, if there be such a thing as a smile which conveys appreciation and does not merely seem to,

then it is possible that a scene which is humorous may not only seem worthy, but be so, despite its exquisite imperfections. Nor shall we need to deaden our human senses to the worth, in order to appreciate the humor. And surely these are not extravagant assumptions. If it were only by shutting our minds to the reality of what is taking place in life, that we could see the comic in it, comic perception would be a commoner thing than it is. A group of savages will laugh outrageously at a black brother drowning in the sea, if he does it somewhat funnily. And we all know the people who support a reputation for humor on their ability to see a funny side in everything. There is a long stretch between either of these types, and Carlyle's Deity, who laughed when he saw two of his 'little mannikins' trying to 'explode' each other fighting a duel,—'the little spit-fires'! And is there a better way of expressing the difference than precisely to say that the one scene was comical through exclusion of its significant features for lack of sympathy and fine perception, while the other became comical by being taken so wholly in. The fact remains, of course, that a laugh is not always thus laden with a discerning sympathy; and the construction of it as society's appreciation of a form of good has to face the fact that it can be derisive and mocking. And the question, which of these betrays its fundamental nature, may be difficult. But there remains this other fact, that no human being can place another's interests wholly outside of his own. If it is as a member of society that he laughs, it is no less as a member of the same society that the other man is laughed at. And so long as all laughter is thus society's laugh at itself, we have good reason to assume that the nature of the highest humor is latent in it all. So far as Bergson's investigation has brought the comic spirit into kinship with the moral on the basis of a common character, then, it was just,—whatever we may say of the justice of entitling that character mechanism. But he gives to both together a false place, exactly in

so far as he fails to regard this 'mechanism' which is their principle, as a constituent of the ideal towards which society aspires.

This attempt to extrude from the true movement of life all abruptness, harshness, recklessness of environment seems to take us very far away from that conception by which Bergson has elsewhere explained the course of evolution, the conception of a vast and irresistible *élan de vie* crashing through all obstacles towards its goal, shedding even parts of its own being rather than be stopped in its course. But only at first sight. The very characteristic of the *élan* is that it has nothing mechanical about its movement. It is not meant to be parallel to the movement of the runner who comes to grief by not minding his path. Its character is to succeed, not to fail. And it succeeds by its sinuosity, its variability, its graduated changes. The reason it must sacrifice its own being during its course is just its inability to admit mechanism or space or, generally, negation, into itself. That is why the stream of life bifurcates into narrower and narrower channels which progressively become lost to each other. If the gaps which the intellect sees could have made part of the reality of life, if the abruptness of mechanical transitions could have been taken up by it into itself and made part of itself, in a word, if it could have accommodated negation within its own being, then the sacrifice would still be made. But it would not be final. Life would still have to submit to the necessity of differentiating itself if it were ever to reach the human level. A man would not be an animal, nor an animal a plant. But life would not have lost itself in the process. In man it could still preserve the essentials of its whole nature. As his understanding it could embrace the lower forms and conserve their value. But within the being of reality, on Bergson's construction, there is no room for negation. And so the sacrifice is final.